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Oral history Irene Polley
March 4, 1997
Interview by Laurie Horn and Evelyn McClure

E: Irene, when did you settle in this area?

I: We came in August of 1945.

E: You and your husband and his name was?

I: George Oliver Polley

E: What did you do, did he have something to work at?

I: No, the War was just over. He was a newspaperman before that and when WWII broke out he went and worked in the shipyard. Then when the war was over we wanted to get the children up in the country so we came up here. First we moved to Washington because I wanted to move back home next to my family. We moved up there in May and moved back to California in August.

E: Why didn't you stay in Washington?

I: It wasn't what I thought it was going to be.

E: Where did your husband work for a newspaper, was it in the Bay area?

I: Examiner. In circulation. Took care of carriers.

E: So you came here and how did he get established in working?

I: We came here and went to church and were looking for a realtor and we met Dorothy Dykman she was Dorothy James after. She had a little office on Main, 220 S. Main and so we talked to her and she took us out and we bought a house next to Bassignani's garden. While she was there she asked George what he was going to do? He said he hadn't made up his mind, we'd saved enough we could get along till he decided. She said well why don't you get your license and come in with me. So that's what he did.

E: It must have been a boom right after the war were there a lot of people moving into the area?

I: Yes, quite a few. He was a little slow in getting started but it didn't take him long.

E: Were there new housing developments or were people buying country property?

I: Maybe, I don't remember. He did well. He was selling everything (homes and property) And after he'd been there with her about 6 months she came to him and told him Louis James had been after her to marry him but he says I can't stay in business if we get married. So she says I'd like to give you the business. So that's the way he got it. It wasn't then like it is now. You go and take a half a day's test and you got it (license) now you have tests for 2 days and so much college.

E: I imagine it was easier to sell property too you didn't have all the paperwork like now.

I: You look at the files now and there're this thick on each customer. Then you had one page. And I worked with him for 25 years in the office as secretary. And raised a family.

E: How many children did you have?

I: Four. Loretta is the oldest and 3 sons. They all live around here. I'm lucky. I realized that when Daddy was so sick.

E: You grew up in Washington State. When did your family settle in that area?

I: They were in Kent, 30 miles from Seattle. There were 15 in our family (children). My youngest sister was just a month older than my daughter. The thirteenth child was a boy born premature and didn't last long. But the time you were 14 or 15 you got out on your own. That's what I did I went to Seattle and worked for a doctor. Went to high school.

E: And you were all on your own going to high school?

I: Yes, it was a good family I was living with. I took care of their child and did housework for my room and board.

E: How did you meet your husband?

I: I met him in Ellensburg, WA. My grandma who I had lived with the first two years of my life, the family had scarlet fever so when I was born Grandma took me. She was going to Ellensburg to take care of a daughter who was going to have a baby and she didn't feel able to do it alone so she asked me to go with her. George was on the newspaper there. The Ellensburg News. So I went over there I met him.

E: Then you were married in Washington?

I: No, we went together quite awhile. I was working for a photographer and taking care of his child. I decided to stay in Ellensburg instead of coming back to Seattle. The Depression came on the newspaper he worked for was owned by 3 brothers so they decided they would have to

do it themselves and he got laid off. So started back to Eugene, OR where his oldest sister lived. He had no parents. His parents died a day apart when he was 11 years old. He was on his own when he was 14. He went to work on an uncle's ranch and his oldest sister was in Eugene. So when he got laid off he decided to go to Eugene and because he had a chance to get on the Eugene paper. He started out got as far as Seattle, he called me and I was crying. So he says If I come back and get you will you marry me? I said sure. So he came back. We stopped at my folks at Kent and told them and then we went on down to Vancouver and were married there. You just went to a preacher and got married.

E: So you just sort of eloped?

I: Yeah. Romantic. After we were married we came to Eugene. Halfway there the lights went out and we followed a bus. No lights. It was really romantic. In Eugene he got into selling (for the newspaper) not circulation and times were hard. People didn't have money but they would trade in chickens, eggs and he would take that as part pay.

E: So you stayed in Eugene for awhile. How did you end up in California?

I: My girl was born in Eugene. My son, my oldest boy, I was ready to have him anytime. And George heard from a man he'd worked for before on a paper in Eureka. And wanted to know if George wanted to come down and work there? He went, I stayed in Eugene until George was born, George Jr. and went down there. And were there awhile but we weren't happy there. Mr. Cassidy was not the kind of man George like to work for, he had his parties...and if you weren't part of it you weren't part of the paper. And he just didn't feel that way. So he heard from Bob Blair, that's the man that got him there and he was in San Francisco and told him there was an opening in San Francisco, good pay, $27.50 a week and wanted to know if he was interested.

E: How many years were you in San Francisco. Did you actually live inthe city?

I: Yes, we bought a home there off Ocean Ave. Maremont eventually. George had never owned a home and all my life I'd lived in a ahome my parents owned and I could hardly stand ...(?) I had a restaurant on Haight St.

E: What kind was it?

I: It was not a restaurant, it was a counter at the 5 and 10. Remember how they usedto have those. And I did all my cooking at home and brought the food there and I had real good business.

E: How many years did you do that?

I: About two years. Things got going good so I sold out. I got a license and I was foster mother for babies for the Children's Home Society in SF.

E: How many children did you take in ?

I: About 30 during the time.. all babies. They'd bring me sick ones. I'd had surgery and had a kidney taken out something that had bothered me from the time I was born none of the doctors could find what it was. Dr. Cary in SF at the University was where I went. He told me if I wanted anymore children to wait 5 years. So I had to have something to do.

E: You were taking in children in between having your own?

I: Yes, there is 8 years between Bud and my son Harry, he's the one that's in the business (Polley, Polley & Madsen Realtor) my second son. I'm the first Polley, he's the second one.

E: The war came along---what was it like for your husband to work at the shipyard. What did he do there?

I: He was a riveter..he went down in the hole under ships in the building.

E: What did you do during the war?

I: I stayed home and got scared. He was an air raid warden. Its an erie thing to see San Francisco go black and the siren would come on and he'd go out ..... I still got my ration books. After awhile he wanted to get out of the city and we sold our home and moved to Redwood City and lived there.

E: Can you remember any other things that were unusual about day to day living during the war that stand out in your mind?

I: We had a big garden. He worked from midnight to 7. Then part of the day he'd work in the garden.

E: Was it hard to grow things, cause you were out in the fog belt of SF.?

I: No he had a beautiful garden, string beans, corn.

E: Were all your neighbors growing gardens too? The Victory Garden idea?

I: Ah huh, well he shared his with people.

Laurie: Did you have to stand in line to get meat?

I: Yes, and sugar. Sometimes we got it and sometimes we didn't.

E: They'd run out?

I: We had chickens and a cow, that's why we wanted to get out ofthe city so we could.

E: In Redwood city you had a cow?

I: Yes, we lived on Spring St. we first lived on Haven, we rented, we didn't buy. Then we bought on Spring St. and it was going out of the town, country. Now its all commercial.

E: Well, did many people do the same thing? Have chickens and cows?

I: Yes, anybody that could.

Laurie: There was the train there, we didn't have gas.

I: That was before my last two boys were born. In Redwood City. Palo Alto....

E: Then you came up here.

I: Then we went to Washington for a a few months. We sold everything, sold our home, went up there. ....the people had no comfort in the campground...if it rained we just sat at home. I started developing a bad allergy. The doctor said take her back south. Our second son Harry was sick all the time, the doctors could never find what was wrong. He'd run a fever. But it rained all the time we were there, 3 months. So we came back here. During the war we'd bought a ranch at Trenton with George's oldest sister and husband. We'd used to come up during the war and we liked it up here.

E: We were talking about Trenton with Mildred Bondelie.

I: There were a lot of prune ranches up there.

E: Did someone else run it for you?

I: George's brother-in-law. They lived there.

E: Its interesting you still see a few (prune) trees in Healdsburg but in funny places its not like 20-30 years ago and you looked across the whole valley and it was all blossoms. What did people do with the prunes? Did they dry them themselves or sold them.?

I: Sold them.. to a cooperative that dried them.

E: Did you own a lot of property besides selling it for other people.?

I: Yeah, we got one one place on Petaluma ave. for a widow lady that had a hard time. and we bought another further down for Mrs. Todd, do you remember her? (Laurie: Yes) She had no place to live. Her grandson is married to one of my granddaughters. We had the big house across from the high school. from there we went to Sexton Road. Dad wanted to get the kids out of town and we bought a ranch out there. had chickens. We moved back, he was helping mr. Robinson, who was a friend of his, on high school road and was selling houses there. Mr. Robinson had a home on the hill and the house behind. We sold a ranch there and moved there.

E: On High School Road?

I: Yes, Dad decided to go out of real estate and into the chicken business so he'd give the two younger boys something to do. We had 20,000 hens (on High School Road) On ten acres. We lived in the little house in back and the Robinsons lived in the house in Front. He decided to move to Los Angeles. We sold his house to the ? then our oldest son came to work for us and he lived in the house in back.

E: How long did you have the chicken business?

I: I don't remember. (Laurie: Forever) George kept his real estate license, gave up the office. Decided to work with the boys full time. You had to collect eggs and candle them, vaccinate your chickens. I helped with vacinnating. I broke my leg one time so they put me on the egg cart and pushed me around so I could vaccinate chickens.

Laurie: But I think it was relaxing to raise chickens instead of doing real estate?

I: Oh yes, he'd done real well in real estate. But he felt like the boys needed work and needed supervision.

Laurie: Was there anyone else in real estate at that time?

I: Yes, Best & Feaks, George Keefe, and George Groves. George Groves didn't like us at all, he'd write us letters telling my husband he's going to lose his license because he had somebody in his office who didn't have a license (Irene). I didn't sell I just did his bookwork. One of the developers was Jim Cotter. I think about the little homes he built on (?)knoll? someplace up in there. $24,500. Now they sell for $195,000 or $200,000 the same homes. Its unbelieveable.

E: What was Sebastopol like when you were living here. What significant changes were there?

I: Well they took out the tracks. My kids didn't likethat when they took the train away.

Laurie: I don't think anyone liked it. I don't know why what the people didn't get up in arms about it.

E: Maybe if it had stayed a passenger train.

I: There are lots of changes, the type of people who live here now compared to then. Its a lot different.

Laurie: There are not so many farmers. We had packing houses, vinegar works, there just isn't a lot of business in town. There's a lot of little shops but Barlow's is about the only thing left.

E: There were small grocery stores, now we have the big ~~changes~~ chains.

I: Cheney's grocery store was right next to our office. The first office we had. On Main St. Had a delicatessen. Had a fountain on Burnett, the corner, the empty lot now.

Laurie: Was there Belmont Terrace here when you first started.

I: Gaddini, Gambogi the ones who had the theatre. The subdivision behind community church. They had their own water. it wasn't in the city limits. I think it is in the city now.

E: We're in Fircrest Manor, the subdivision up Fircrest and to Belle View. Mr. Scudder was involved in it. Well your children must have gone to Analy. Anything different there? When did they built the new building.

Laurie: 1937?

I: Harry graduated in 1960 and John in 1962.

Laurie: When I graduated in 1935 there were tearing down the old high school.

E: What did your children do after high school? Did they go on to college?

I: Just one , Harry. To San Jose State. John went into ? and was in Vietnam.

E: Harry stayed in real estate.?

I: And John is a building contractor. My oldest son had the Arco station on Main St. for a lot of years. The day of our 50th anniversary he sold it. He still owned the lot and he built the bank that is on there and its leased. My daughter got married and had 4 kids. She was in high school in music and sang. But she got married and didn't finish high school. Bud, my oldest, all he wanted to do was drive cars. He's a mechanic supervisor?

Harry was active in sports and school activities. Played football and baseball. And John played little league here in Sebastopol. Our real estate office sponsored baseball "Grandma Polley's Angels. We had a big billboard put up for me. I loved the age from 10 to 12. I got sponsorship from people and collected the money, did that for a long time. I drove cancer patients pretty near 10 years. Worked in the Discover shop (American Cancer Society) in Santa Rosa until they moved downtown. I had a little trouble in my leg at that time, walking so I had to quit. You couldn't park close you had to park 4-5 blocks away and walk to the shop. I had real good times there. I was involved in Santa Rosa for the Sierra Children's Home. Each Christmas we raised money, about 4 years. We had it at the vets building. I was with the auxiliary one year. I tried to keep busy.

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